Many years ago, friends kept asking me about my long career in hospitality and requesting my reminiscences

“ You must write a book about it” was the common retort. I must admit, being busy, it got put on the back burner to simmer (great simile, don’t you agree?) I then found this proof so I now dictated it into a text-from-speech app and here is the result.

It's hard to believe. The culmination of many visits to the blushing bride's parents, and today, at last, the ceremony at the registry office is over. The assembled guests are seated in a rather seedy church hall in the middle of a shopping parade in a north London suburb.

As a caterer. I can see behind the scenes prior to the event and believe me, no two events are similar.

From the initial tentative inquiry to the acceptance of your quote is a minefield. To be trodden with great care, and the unexploded mine can take the shape of Dad, who, after all, is invariable about to be presented with a bill. Nearly always the quoted figure was well in excess of his budget and yet here he is in the unenviable position of having to sit listening, with a strained smile, to his daughter enthusiastically squealing with delight at the thought of book matches in Boston Silver or a profiterole wedding cake festooned with spun sugar.

This was not the case here. As I said, every client was different and this was possibly rather more different than most. Firstly, the wedding was ‘mixed’ In caterers’ jargon this can mean colour, mix, race, totally different age group or different religions. This was the latter. Wedding and funerals seem to underline, often hidden differences which seem to polarise at these stained times. When visiting to discuss the function, it was soon obvious that the wedding was being made under protest and there was no love lost between the families or opposing teams as they soon appeared to be.

I'd briefly met the boy’s mother. A well-meaning Jewish mother would obviously have brought the boy up alone in recent years and doted on him. Contrary to tradition she appeared to be paying for the function She certainly did not bestow her blessings to the forthcoming union. She was none too reticent in letting me, in the role of Father Confessor, know this, and for obvious reasons I passed no comment.

Until today, the day of the wedding, we did not have the pleasure of seeing the bride, but rumours were filtering back to me from my fascinated staff, that one of the ‘happy couple”, was rather the worse for wear.

All eyes went to the emergency exit as the wedding couple appeared in the hall, walking past the uncollected piles of jumble covered with a brocade cloth - (The venue obviously had many uses which made it possibly not the most attractive of venues but the choice was not ours.) They slowly crossed the badminton court lines towards the top table.

The rumours were right, the bride could hardly stand. Rather a case of Johnny Walker than a case of wedding nerves. Many of the bride's family members were also in a fairly intoxicated state and the bar had had quite a bashing even prior to the meal. The customary sherry on arrival, having been totally disregarded in favour of more potent delights.

The boy's Jewish family were feeling a little out of place in the church hall and were becoming obviously embarrassed by the developing situation. The opposing teams were glaring across tables at one another.

The married couple settled themselves at the top table, signalling the start of the meal. The ever-perceptive waitresses were agog at the fact that the wedding appeared to be closely allied to the expected arrival of the first born as the bye now hysterically drunk bride was obviously heavily with child.

We wondered whether this was a marriage made in heaven. It appeared otherwise

Suddenly, a resounding smack was heard from the top table. And a furious groom, his face an uncomfortable shade of indigo, his bow tie at a strange angle, was seen removing, or more correctly, dragging, his almost paralytic bride from the hall. My staff questioned what was the form now? Should we continue with the meal where the very reason for the celebrations were no longer in attendance? A large number of guests by now were totally unaware of the fiasco taking taking place due to the level of their alcoholic intake. Others toyed with their cutlery in embarrassment. Mother was in tears and repeated none too diplomatically. "She's not good enough for my son…. she's not good enough my son." This was repeated over and over, and none too quietly.

I explained to my staff that we should continue, and maybe this decision was amplified by the fact that I hadn't actually been paid. So

We continued and after a short while, which seemed like an eternity, the couple returned to their seats and the meal continued in silence broken only by the noise of cutlery clattering on plates. Mum's constant wailing about the unsuitability of the marriage and general highly personal remarks as to the past life of her new daughter-in-law were loudly expressed.

My ever-vigilant and totally unflappable manageress was positioned behind the top table, waiting for the newlyweds to catch up with the rest of the guests. She would then signal to the rest of the waitresses to clear, but before she was able to give this signal she was suddenly aware that more fireworks about to explode.

The bride, up to this point, had been worryingly quiet, too quiet in fact, had had short fuse lit by the indiscreet mum in close proximity and the fuse was being fanned by the endless tirade of abuse, screamed. "I've had enough." The plate, well, actually, my plate was thrust into the air, propelled by a force that Guy Fawkes would be have been proud of, and this was closely followed by a rapid staccato of knife, spoon and cruets.

My manageress appeared more like the star turn from Billy Smart Circus, caught the plate in midair, closely followed by a left-handed catch of all the cutlery and the cruets. In fact nothing hit the floor, with the exception of the uneaten meal which travelled downwards mum in-law's smart dress.

A spontaneous cheer went up, probably instigated by myself, relieved at the safe descent of my china. This was followed by a second resounding smack and the second hasty exit of the 'happy' couple from the wedding breakfast

The meal now continued in stony silence and prepared speeches were seen to be hastily pushed back into suit pockets, never again to see the light of day

Amazingly, we did get paid, possibly out of embarrassment. The payment even included the couple's meal who actually did not consume much of the feast

Once again I wondered what am I doing here, as indeed I wondered this on many occasions both before and after that day, and indeed I still do. It is a strange fact that any caterer will agree with. Love it or hate it, catering gets into your blood and it is very difficult to adopt a different lifestyle once having tasted the delights of the catering world.

Ok, I know I should have started at the beginning but this is one of the many stories/happenings/incidents that I will tell you about (and hopefully not bore you)

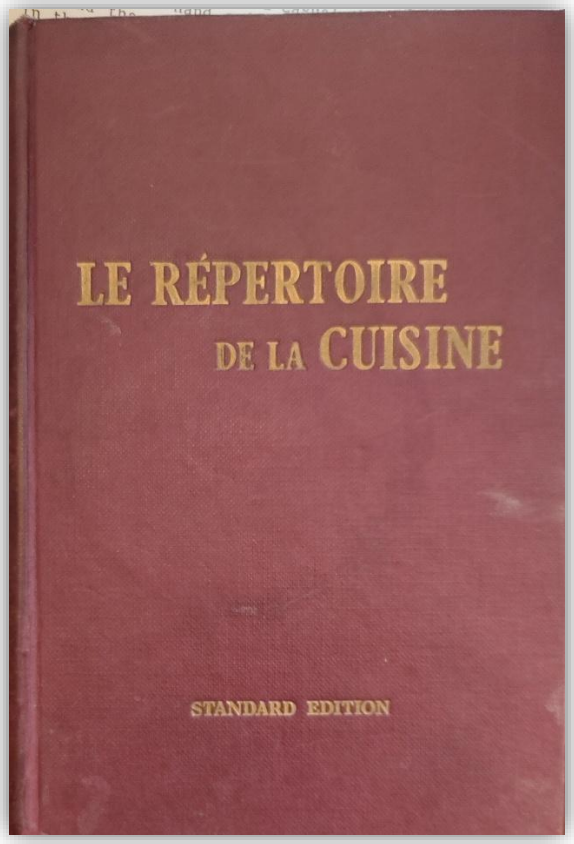
My parents travelled a lot when I was young and I totally loved the buzz of stations, airports, foreign hotels and with dad having always been involved in food in one way or another, catering, or hospitality as it's now known, seems to have been an obvious career choice.

Most of my friends seem to have decided on a much easier career choice but none of us probably realised that at the time

I started my career the proper way via a four-year hotel management course, which entailed seven months in college each year followed by five months in leading hotels. Year one was as a chef, year two as a waiter, year three in the cocktail bar, and the final year on reception. This was known as a sandwich course, and I had to put up with the obvious family puns as to whether I would graduate onto buttered toast.

The first seven months in catering college, our group spent a life-changing time studying, and bearing in mind our tender years, much was new to us. We learnt the rudiments of catering and then we left to our various West-End hotel placements determined to teach the riffraff out there how things should be done.

We knew it all, as Escoffier was our bible,



and we knew all the French terminology and correct garnishes etc. Were we in for a rude awakening. For one thing, it is necessary to be able to communicate in order to educate, and not one person in the bowels of the earth called the kitchen could actually speak or understand English, These kitchens bore no resemblance to our modern college kitchen,. The kitchen language was French and the orders came down from the *** Hotel restaurant via a tube system to us minions waiting below. I soon realised that rather than me teaching the catering world, I had a lot of learning to do myself. The quicker I temporarily forgot the college teachings, the better I would progress. My time up to then, had not been spent on a very deep philosophical plane, but the kitchen was the nearest my youthful imagination could bring itself to portray hell on earth. For one thing, the heat was unbearable and I quickly realised that I was the lowest thing there, marginally above the ever-present cockroaches - but I feel that they were even more acceptable with some of the kitchen brigade. Mr. Lee. The Chinese chef saucier, all 4'6" of him strolled round the kitchen and anything not nailed down disappeared below his 4'7" apron.

Mind you, if you were his commis, you certainly ate well.

The staff food was disgusting and consisted of leftovers from the many banquets. The head chef and sous chef sat at trestles which were set up by us commis before lunchtime service and they had reasonable food. The chef de parties also ate separately and made sure their

food was good. We ate rubbish until gradually we got wiser and a few of us organised personal banquets for our select few.

Starting at the vegetable section. I had to continually run to the cold room to get a portion of salsify or epinard. I totally fed my face full of strawberries and other delights whilst in the confines of the chilled environment.

I was constantly, like all the other commas, being screamed at, to run faster or get my act together. If one suffered with a lack of confidence. This was a make-or-break existence

In fact quite a few of my college course mates did not return after his first taste of catering…an initiation of fire. I came home mentally and physically exhausted and still have a low tolerance level when I hear people moaning about their hard work load. I think that they don't know how lucky they are

If you were unlucky enough to arrive early, you entered the dark kitchen with caution and hurriedly turned all lights on. It was a numbing experience the first time as a deathly rattle will be heard. This was made by the thousands of cockroaches scattering in every direction, making for the drainage colours. I still remember the croquettes potatoes on trays cooling overnight and being obviously a source of nourishment to the uninvited hotel guests, This of course was several years ago and undoubtedly under the constant policy of improvement, there are probably no cockroaches to be seen scampering anymore.

I expect they now meander back to the daytime shelters, fully satiated and far too old to do any scampering. The chef's favourite was throwing handfuls of them on the solid top stove and hearing the crunches as the shells cracked. How any gastronomic delights were forthcoming from this den of filth was a constant puzzle to me and the only environmental health officer, who were called sanitary inspectors in those days I ever saw were seen sitting in the chef de cuisine's office. They left with a parcel looking suspiciously like a bottle.

My hours were from 10:00 AM to 10:00 PM, with a four hour break from 2:00 PM to 6:00 PM. This entailed my leaving home at 8:30 AM in the rush hour and in the afternoon break I swam at the YMCA at Tottenham Court Road or played football or rowed in the Serpentine in Hyde Park in fine weather. I went to museums or the ever-present cartoon cinemas if the weather was bad. I often met Lynn who worked in The Strand opposite my hotel and she went home whilst I returned to work. The frustrating thing was that at 6:00 PM I was going back to work while the tube was packed with people going home. I had left the same time as them in the morning. To add insult to injury, I travelled home at night, catching the last train with a carriage full of young couples going home after a night out. I never got a weekend off for obvious reasons this was unknown in the catering world.

All this for £7.50 a week.

Me (right) as a chef in 1961 at Park Lane Hotel

Dad (left) as chef in Koblenz in 1939

Why would you want to put up with these conditions? That was easy. Lots of young commis like myself were there to get the name of the *** Hotel behind them as a stepping stone in their chosen career and the hotel took full advantage this endless supply of cheap ready labour. If you did not like it, there were plenty more to take your place.

I graduated, if that is the correct term, to staff cook on a few occasions but with the food at my disposal, I did not noticeably make any new friends.

The traditional hatred of chefs, who consider themselves as professionals, for waiters who were considered as rubbish goes back a long way. And a sight to behold was a chef chasing a waiter through the revolving doors with a knife or ladle full of spaghetti.

The plongeur is a wash-up area where the heavy duty pots were washed by a succession of imported labour. As this is probably the world's worst job, one never saw the same face twice and the smell did not encourage one to dwell in that area for longer than was necessary. Having badly burnt one of the large copper saucepans, I took this off to the plongeur and coming round the corner I was confronted by a stark-naked coloured gentleman sitting in the wooden sink. Full of bubbly water and calmly having his bath singing away in his native tongue

Initiation into the kitchen took many forms, some pandering to the sadistic nature of the instigator and some hilarious for the onlookers, if not for the poor victim.

Tradition dictates that no one sits on the worktops in the kitchen. The accepted way for rapid bum removal was the pouring of boiling water onto the bench where the offending bum is perched. Believe me, one does not sit on the worktop twice.

My demoralising/initiation task occurred at the end of a long working day. I was told to turn all of the cooking ranges off for the night and I was surprised how many of the kitchen brigade seemed to be, unexpectedly, in no hurry to go home that night. They were lounging about, seemingly talking and casually watching me going around the long process of turning off all the gas taps until I came to the last aisle. I searched everywhere but could not see where the gas controls were. All eyes were now on me but no way was I going to be defeated by such a simple task. If they could be turned on, they could be turned off. I went round the back of the range to see if the controls were there, but they were nowhere to be seen. By this time, I was aware of considerable laughter and I slowly twigged this was directed at me. If they knew where the switches were, they certainly were not telling me. Suddenly it dawned on me. These were solid fuel cookers and had no controls. One merely controlled the heat by positioning the pots on the solid tops and by the judicious use of the rings. I fell for that one well and truly, but after that a perceptible difference was noticeable in the way I was accepted. I had passed!

By the time I left, I had actually learned a lot and I now fully sympathise with 'behind the scenes' staff.

It was a welcome relief to return to the zany student life. Quite a few of us had got old bangers by this time and we headed for Skegness. The parents of one of our year had a private hotel/guest house there and we seemed to take the sleepy seaside town by storm. The sites of our ancient cavalcade of really old Crocs having burn ups down the deserted, windswept front was frowned on by the few brave enough to confront Skeggies notorious icy winds.

I always felt that it was marginally better to die young rather than end one's days in a cold English seaside out of season.

Our crowd of aspiring hoteliers had become firm friends by now. We swapped hotel stories and realised that the London hotel scene was very, very different behind the scenes to the glamour upfront

Stage 2 was, after a further seven months in college, back to the West End hotels for a further five months in one's allocated hotel, but this time not in the capacity as a chef, but as a waiter. I started as breakfast waiter in a hotel frequently main frequented mainly

buys tours, predominantly American, and they had the ‘English Breakfast’ syndrome instilled in them back in the good old US of A.

They ordered mounds of kidneys and smoked haddock and prunes and constantly asked me how we ate such a huge breakfast all the time. Having had only cornflakes and tea, I felt unqualified to answer as a typical Englishman, but I felt that the ‘full English’ and the typical Englishman is a publicised phenomenon that does not quite exist anymore, if in fact it ever did. The catering rumour about Americans being lousy typers were certainly true in this case and many stayed several days. They typically said “look after us son and we will see OK when we leave”. Their party then suddenly departed, often at odd hours, but the seemingly poor memories of the American citizens were totally unable to recall their promises to the hard-pressed staff. Looking back, I realise that these parties were probably taking advantage of the dollar's strength against the pound and these were folk who previously had not travelled much before and were not too well versed into the norms of travel etiquette.

The informality of breakfast was contrasted with the more formal lunch and the even more formal evening dinner. As a commis waiter I covered a lot of carpet in those early days, running from the station waiter to the kitchen and back, only to be confronted by another order ready to be sent to the kitchen

The good thing was the food. No good meal went into the restaurant intact. If a steak looked appetising, you would create a fuss in the kitchen, shouting that no way could you serve such a tiny portion to your table and so on, constantly complaining about the inadequate size. Eventually, to keep you quiet, an extra piece was put onto your service flat. The second it left the kitchen it somehow found its way from the silver flat to your starving stomach. Any waiter who goes hungry is a very unusual man with very little natural flair. Having a good head waiter and possibly due to staff shortage, I soon became station waiter and I enjoyed the adrenaline surge when things got frantic. I was now seeing the waiter/chef hatred from the other side of the fence. I still only got £7.50 but we're sharing in the tronc. The tronc is that archaic system of the pooling of the tips, with points decided in an arbitrary fashion, and awarded for seniority and ability. I had neither at this stage, but the little extra I received was very welcome.

I was then transferred to the *floors* where I was to see the cushy little number that some waiters managed to secure for themselves. *Floors* were small pantries run by a crowd of really cheerful Italians with small hot plates, toasters and were situated discreetly on various floors which provided room service. Guest orders were phoned through for cooked breakfast or toast etc and these would be ordered from the still room, or kitchen, or prepared directly in the pantry then covered with silver domes and rushed to the relevant room via the lifts. The only problem was, at peak time, everyone wanted breakfast at the same time, lifts were constantly in use and the kitchen in the depths of the hotel was madly busy. Consequently,

once everything was assembled it was a race against time. Having the passkey, one knocked briefly, shouted “Good morning, breakfast,” and strode purposefully into the room. The sights I saw in those early days made a wiser man of me. We were supposed to say, “Would you like me to open the curtains, Sir?”…but frequently the “Sir” was otherwise engaged, and breakfast was the last thing on his mind. As my eyes adjusted to the dim lights, I was frequently confronted by a young lady laying on top of the bed clothes, wearing a charming smile and little else. Strangely, the cutlery began rattling on the tray and the glass of orange juice developed a life of its own. The realisation slowly dawned on me the cause of the slow return for further orders of my Italian colleagues. Some of these rooms were on a reserved allocation for stopover aircrews from Nigeria and Sudan airways. An ever-changing vista of air hostess’s boobs became my daily thrill. From then on both Sudan and Nigeria were places high on my travel agenda. I even got brought back fresh pineapples from one young lady.

Suddenly college seemed so tame after these fun-filled days. Our college restaurant was open to both staff members and the public specifically for our training. Students prepared the lunch and other students served the meal. It was a common sight to see a starving guest who had patiently waited for his meal and was about to place a succulent morsel into his salivating orifice only to have the whole meal pulled away with the chef tutor telling the student to serve it from the left. Meals were subsidised, but I still felt sorry for the long-suffering guests

I was chosen to represent our college in an inter-college contest. Our waiting skills were being judged by a team of famous figureheads from the catering world who were served a meal in the college restaurant who were tasked to note all one skills, or lack of them.

It was a nerve-wracking experience, not lessoned by the constant reminders that you represented your college. By the time for service, I was ready to run for it. The party sat down and I nervously presented the menu and they decided, with two exceptions, to have the hors d’oeuvres varies. I presented the smoked trout, to the two guests, beautifully garnished, and returned to the kitchen for the balance of the order. The Chefs-d’oeuvre were divided into 8 earthenware cocottes and as if these did not weigh enough, they were then placed on a heavy silver tray. I took them from the service station and presented them to the table waiting for the “ums and ahs” to terminate. I then offered the tray for selection to the first lady guest. She proceeded to question me about the contents of each cocotte. By this time the tray, balanced on my left arm seemed to weigh a ton. The second lady guest was the proprietor of a well-respected French restaurant but this hesitant lady could not decide which of the proffered delights to take. By the time she had decided and was satisfied and I could pass on to the next guest, it felt as if the assembled guests were all sitting on the tray and I could feel perspiration running down my forehead. The next lady seemed to suffer with both hearing problems and made the first Lady seem like Speedy Gonzalas, as she took so long to decide. I

eventually managed to get the description of the various dishes through to her, mentally making a note that if she gave me a tip, I would spend it on a buying her a new battery for her hearing aid. By now I felt so hot and uncomfortable I wondered whether to put the tray in the centre of the table, asking them all to dig in. To this day I can feel the weight of that tray and whenever I hear the name of that certain well-known restaurateur, I resolved, one day, to go into her restaurant and to ask for her personal professional service of frogs legs and requesting her to personally remove the toe nails.

No, we did not win the trophy but we were runners up. The other hotel schools must have been really bad!

After the seven months back at college, we were launched, once again onto the unsuspecting hotels of the West End. For our five-month stint. This time, resplendent in black jackets with razor sharp creases, in our pinstripes, dazzlingly white shirts and regulation silver grey ties. Boy, was my mum proud of me. My large briefcase contained notebooks, a daily paper and little else. I was allocated to The M***** Hotel which was a smaller hotel close to Marble Arch, but part of a large group and I learned a lot, especially hotel bookkeeping. This was just changing from a manual tabular ledger system to a more modern automated system, which by modern standards is really antiqua dated but at that time was very advanced but bore no resemblance to anything I had learnt at college.

The niceties of being in the front office was very apparent after the previous two years. But even here the customer/staff relationship was in an over-patronising manner and it slowly dawned on me that the catering profession has a voyeuristic side to it in as much as one is always on the touchline watching the play

Morning departure time was the busiest time as businessmen stood impatiently, several deep at the desk, endeavouring to settle their accounts. We had to ensure that all

those last-minute phone calls or breakfast extras were allocated to the correct party as any that were not discovered until after departure had to be paid by reception ourselves and you were not Mr. popularity if it was your oversight.

Chaos frequently ensued if an arriving coach party arrived this time mad buy time. The Argentinian reception manner manager, all of five foot tall, raced around in circles in a total panic, forgetting every word of English in the process. With everyone trying their hardest to attract your attention and phones going and the bills flying through the Sweda and Mr Rios. chasing his own tail, it was a wonder that anyone went out with the right bill. Old hands settled their accounts and night before departure.

Morals in hotels were very different from the outside world and all the staff were having liaisons with one another. Possibly the availability of beds and the amount of young people working away from home and in the big city for the first time had something to do with it. We therefore did not frown on, or judge, the misdemeanours of our guests. There was a code word used for the businessmen and their secretaries requesting adjoining rooms. However, there was one big *no-go* area and that was if a guest booked a single room and subsequently took a woman up there. Now this was not done. This offended our occupancy, not our morals. And if we saw a young lady going up, the word went out on the ground floor bush telegraph. Our concierges would book a show, arrange a trip, anything at all in fact if you tipped him enough. However, if he nodded in a certain way towards reception, that was enough for the word to go from reception to the housekeeper, who got one of the chambermaids to check on the offending party, using her passkey for some signs of double occupancy. The word wound its way back down to reception. On departure the gentleman in question was asked, in a loud voice if he accepted the double occupancy charge, which invariably he did, mumbling his acceptance with a very red face.

I often did the late shift if I missed the last bus home and I would book myself into any unused bedroom, but as was often the case, we'd let every room in the place and I then stayed with an Italian colleague on reception who lived up to the reputation the Italians are famous for. Many a morning we staggered back to the hotel from his flat in Charlotte St, Fitzrovia, bleary eyed and fit for nothing, only to have the furious Argentinian chase us about our duties

Our hotel, being part of a fairly close group, competed for best occupancy and if spare rooms were still available after 6:00 PM, we phoned around the various hotel room letting agencies, stations and airports to offer unlet rooms.

However, it wasn’t an exact science because after ‘selling’ a room it was often found that someone else had also sold that same room so when the tired tourist arrived one had to taxi

them to another group hotel locally, but invariably if you were overbooked, so was everyone else. I often felt sorry for the tired traveller arriving on a day when trade exhibitions were filling London. The smooth continental charm of both the Argentine reception manager, Mr Rios and my Italian colleague or the brogue of our beautiful Irish receptionist defused many a difficult situation. This was where I learned the use of tact and diplomacy, which is for those who know me, not one of the natural features of my otherwise lovable personality.

Well, back to college and it was nice to see the old faces again, some of them seeming to display the maturity that their recent experience in the hotel world had left on them. But it may have been my imagination

The college work was much tougher, and the pressure was on. A few of us worked as casual waiters, occasionally in the Bloomsbury Hotel, ********** Hotel to earn pocket money helping with their banquets. The whole setup was totally hilarious in its inefficiency. The manager was an ageing homosexual who thought paradise had arrived on earth in the form of fresh young males arriving in his lair. But I think he had a sad awakening when he was assured, in no uncertain terms, that we will not share his tendencies. But we had to award him 10 out of 10 for trying. The homosexual element below stairs was always considerable and we all had our share of approaches. It appeared that with a few nationalities their entire population was made-up entirely of homosexuals but maybe they all decided that hospitality was their forte. One wondered how they actually continued the species. But I'm deviating, if you will forgive the unintentional pun.

We were here to earn some cash pocket money and leave as the speedily as possible. The totally disorganised banquet got underway in this so-called hotel which was, believe it or not, extremely well known in Woburn Place. We were amazed to find that contrary to normal practise no plant check had been made prior to the function. Consequently, it was quickly noticed that there was a shortage of cutlery and plates forcing us to serve the guests utilising the pockets full of spoons etc that we had acquired to ensure that at least our station had sufficient eating implements. Despite all are cunning, we could not anticipate that the hot plates would be hopelessly short of the required plates. The sight of about 15 young waiters rushing across a very busy main London thoroughfare to the hotel opposite and returning with hands full of plates must have raised a few eyebrows. I wondered if the trade union executives attending the function where at all curious that the plates bore hotel logos from other hotels.

The food served could only be described as pathetic and even as a casual waiter employed for just that particular function I was embarrassed to serve it, but it showed the other side of the fence from the correct way that we were being taught at college

The last hotel experience we were about to encounter whilst still college-based was in the bar side of the hotel. Having notice that about 98% of hotel staff appeared to be alcoholics, I was fascinated to see the attractions of the bar from behind the scenes. I was fortunate to be allocated the most famous of London hotels, The ***** Hotel. My first placing was in the Dispense bar which was a very busy bar behind the scenes serving the waiters and it was a very well-equipped bar. The staff running the ball were very professional and as cocktails were very popular with the clientele, we constantly tested one another to get the ingredients and methods correct and I became quite proficient at making cocktails, all of which I've subsequently forgotten. Having a large American clientele, the ever-popular dry Martini was the most popular drink and it was required to be both incredibly cold and dry in service. The waiters were constantly swirling ice and the glasses to cool them. The dry martini was made in bulk at the beginning of the day to be able to dispense them as fast as was required. It was well laced with ice. I was assured that the reason was to satisfy the American desire for drinks to be served at freezing points but I was not too green to realise that the truth was that the melted ice diluted the drink thereby increased profitability. The range of wines was extensive and I had persuaded the cellarmaster to allow me to wander through the far-reaching vaults which stretched for what seemed like miles right under the Thames. The dimly lit tunnels and vaults were eerie and full of atmosphere. There were bottles still paid for and left which were cobweb covered in arched alcoves from earlier war years with famous statesman's names on yellow labels. The wines were an encyclopaedia of names, that up to then, I'd only read about and when confronted with the actual article. one handled the bottles with reverence and could imagine how an art historian must feel to handle a genuine Renoir. As one trod carefully through the cold but dry arches full of racks, one spoke in quiet whispers, as if in a holy place. Possibly this is where Bachus disported himself when in a more sober meditative frame of mind

The floor waiters often appeared at the bar to replenish their floor pantry stock, and I noticed they always took a few bottles of ginger ale with them after a chat to the head barman. Our college had, as in previous years, negotiated a minimum wage for us which was so low that it presented no deterrent to the hotel in employing us and we likened it to slave labour, even against the normal accepted existing low rates. So, after a few weeks when I was given a few extra pounds by the head barman in a brown envelope and told not to say anything or not to ask questions. I was both delighted and surprised and I certainly asked no questions.

I realised it was 'hush money' but I was too poor and too inexperienced to rock the boat so I watched to see what was afoot. As I explained earlier the majority of drinks, especially whiskey, were requested on the rocks, and I was soon aware of the fact that this fact was exploited in the service of short measures. The ice compensating for the shortage of Scotch in the guests' drinks. With the fantastic quantities Scotch served, this short measure soon was transferred into extra bottles of Scotch. In hotel parlance, Scotch currency. But with a tight security staff entrances with bag searches, how was this going to be turned into money? It slowly became apparent that this was in some way connected to the floor waiters and one day it clicked. The small bottles of ginger ale was actually Scotch. By the transfer to the familiar Schweppes bottle, the waiters could openly carry it around the hotel without arising suspicion. It was then transferred back to Scotch bottles on the floors for cash sales for room service. The Schweppes bottles of Scotch had a standard value. This was where I witnessed the huddle of floor waiters discussing something with the head barman. This was the orders being given? The money I was given was probably hush money, but nothing was ever officially mentioned and I certainly never asked.

Every department had *fiddles* and everyone appeared to be ripping everyone else off. The hotel exploited staff in the form of terribly low wages paid for excessive hours worked. The staff ripped off the guests at every opportunity, whether in overcharging in the restaurant, getting backhanders from suppliers, giving short measures in food and drink and expecting tips for every service given At times it seemed to be a roundabout of dishonesty and was and always will be an integral part of hospitality and catering. The problem is in containing it rather than preventing it. Any manager foolish enough to think his business is free of this stigma is a real fool. This was a valuable part of my training and is taught in the university of life rather than college training.

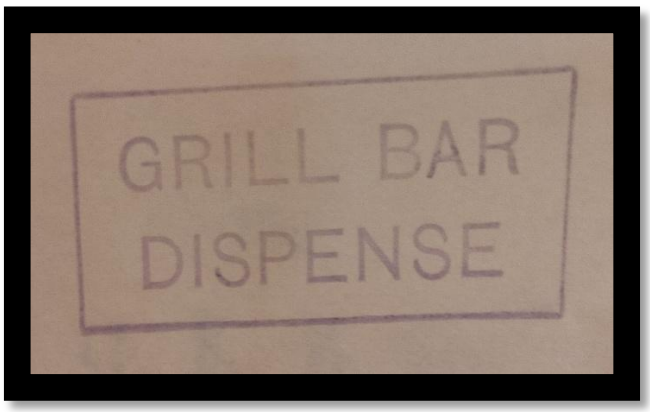
I took my turn in running the staff bar, which was in an exceedingly large totally featureless room, void of any decoration. This was a total contrast to the elegant décor in the guest bars. The Formica-topped tables with alloy cigarette end-filled ashtrays trays. This smoky room was tightly packed with all grades of staff totally segregated adhering to a long-established hierarchy. Never would one see a kitchen porter seated with a chef or a chambermaid with a waiter. The drinks consisted of beer and minerals which were sold at cost price according to hotel tradition. Of course, the kitchen always got their case of daily free beer, which is both customary and very necessary in the heat generated during service.

At the end of the staff bar session it was necessary to cash up and take stock and the bar was very well stocked , so, to do this correctly would entail counting hundreds of full crates stacked in ceiling high piles. On the first session there I thought I would actually check to see if in fact the cases were all full and found to my amazement the lots of the lower levels contained empties with the crown tops pushed back on to make them appear full to the casual checker. I was given this tip by a seasoned old hand. And it was obvious the actual

contents had walked long, long ago. However, a continuous supply of staff bar men followed along ticking the non-existent stock as being all until probably one day in the future when some poor innocent would discover the loss. Another longstanding fiddle

I continually noticed the contrast between guest and staff areas and as an example the kitchen to restaurant door was typical -one side plush fittings with raised decorative features and the reverse was plain and covered with long ingrained filthy finger marks. The staff entrance was a total contrast to the guest entrance on the opposite side of the building

My next bar experience is the opposite end of the scale, as by now I was fairly adept at cocktails, was a stint in the foyer bar. This was a very famous foyer bar in one of the leading hotels in the world. I guess here one had the pleasure of being in the very centre, the well-known meeting place with famous dignitaries constantly seen. I even recognised many famous people from stage and screen. My testing kind time came quicker than expected. When a royal requested a specific cocktail, my UKBG was suddenly no-where to be found and my superb cocktail knowledge total failed me.



Nervously I took some obscure bottles from the shelves and added small measures of each and I then made a very professional looking job of adding the twist of lime and borage all in the silver shaker with shaved ice. I even added the requisite olive etc, and presented it to the entourage to present to the royal with a flourish. I watched him in a practised nonchalant manner as it was carried back to the rest of the party on the silver flat. They were all deep in conversation and I could see it being sipped between sentences. Suddenly the face changed as the entourage walked back to me with a strange look on his face. He requested another. Wow…off course there was no way I could repeat the previous wonderful unique offering as in my total confusion I had no idea of what many totally obscure bottles I had selected and what quantities were dispensed. I therefore brazened it out, mixing the cocktails

with panache. I'm sure he must have had the odd feeling that we all have had when our second cup of tea failed to taste as wonderful as the first one that we'd been dying for.

Back to college for the final. Spent working hard to compensate for the lectures missed after parties, especially in ragtime. A few of our crowd rented a house in of very close to the college. We virtually lived there for some of the term time. There was a constant party there. We had lots of fun, but that's another story altogether. New. Both the finals were looming and in order to get the National Diploma it was necessary to pass on all of the 8 subjects and examinations were tough. Luckily, I was not required to resit any.

Luckily, I was not required to resit and a as I do not think I could have tolerated any longer. At college. Four years on and off was quite enough

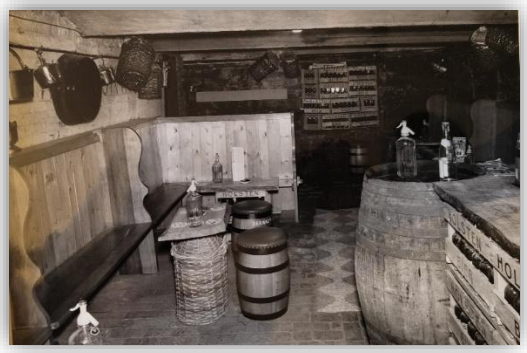
With my impressive diploma, Julie framed, I was ready to face the world. The cards I had printed looked most impressive. As well as well and were passed around the family and studied as if they were valuable paintings. I suppose it is an ego trip. We will have to take it sometime in our life. The real world soon lets you know how unimportant you really are and all the qualifications on your calling cards are just so much. Print experience is what counts

I joined the pub group. Chef and Brewer that were developing the speciality restaurant theme. And they had very many large pub/restaurant operations in and around London and my position was Assistant Manager. I proudly wore my suit and took the position very seriously. Gradually learned that catering in any position is a hands-on job for the purpose of keeping the show running if staff are ill or failed to show. The fact you could also do their job soon transformed your personal image in their eyes, from management stiff, to a person who was

entitled to the respect of a fellow worker. I've taken this philosophy throughout my working life: I would not expect any person to do a job that I personally would not do. This has the additional advantage of seeing all the dodges first hand…. this also proved invaluable.

My first position was at a Chef and Brewer Hotel, The Wheatsheaf at Virginia Water which was beautifully situated in a Surrey beauty spot and it was originally a hotel with 22 rooms. The lower area was repurposed as a speciality house with 3 restaurants and 6 bars one of which was the original saloon bar which the locals seemed to like and this deliberately hadn't been re decorated to preserve this image. There was well-designed vintage bar with old car seats

The cellar area was repurposed as a cellar bar



One restaurant was The Drunken Duck (featuring, as the name implies, roast duck)

The other restaurant was the Lake Room

Outside was a snack bar where we served afternoon teas and good use was made of the gardens close by Windsor Great Park and the lake. I was assistant manager and we had a large number of mainly young staff and our mini-bus driver collected them daily from the surrounding area.

This brave new concept featured set-price meals which, up to then were unknown in pub catering. This meant that for an inclusive price one could get, for example, a rump steak with jacket potato or fries together with garden peas a roll & butter with a desert of ice cream or

cheese and biscuits. The wine list was small, simple but sensibly priced. This whole concept was totally novel at that time but obviously now sounds mundane. It meant that diners knew exactly what it would cost in advance and from a catering point of view it meant we had very good portion control. Some of the pictures here show how the bars and restaurants were decorated.

Over the Tannoy came a request for a barrel change in one of the bars. This was a lesson in avoidance. The particular Holstein lager in question came in alloy barrels under natural pressure. This is fine if handled with great care. If, however, the change required was shortly after delivery on the bumpy ride from the brewery, the very act of breaking the seal, inserting the pipes and screwing down the pump fittings required exercising excessive speed. Having many times had my suits saturated in draught lager, one soon learned to arrive a few minutes after one of the other managers had just completed the changeover.

The queues were especially long at weekends as the word got out as the Wheatsheaf was a 'go-to' place. It was great fun assisting in the running of this youth-orientated world as both staff and customers were young. My friends and my young long-suffering wife often took a run into the country to see me and ended up helping me by manning the bars. Many times, I was too exhausted to do the one-and-a-half-hour drive home at gone midnight so I slept in one of the staff rooms.

I was beginning to see how my life would be if I continued in this side of the catering world and although I enjoyed it and the challenge was exhilarating, the strain it put on any personal life was intolerable. If both of you worked in the same place, or if you were single, it could work, but the working hours and other factors made it very difficult. So, after a lengthy period including covering relief management at a similar smaller steak restaurant bar approx. 15 miles further on at Hartney Whitney, I was promised a transfer to a new pub restaurant complex at Swiss Cottage. The Swiss Cottage was being renovated as the company flagship in central London but unfortunately, this took months longer to finish than expected, so I transferred to a city restaurant which was overlooking The Thames on the north side next to Southwark Bridge. The restaurant and bars overlooked the river and this was my first experience of pub bar work. It was not my scene at all. The lunch times were fine with a busy restaurant and bar and an interesting clientele. But at 6:00 PM, London zombie inhabitants crawled out of the woodwork and made for our pub. Their entire conversation, when there was any at all, was about dogs (racing, not pets). The most interesting thing was to see them depart at closing time. They must have had such a scintillating home life that even our pub atmosphere was preferable to going home

One day the landlord told me to open the windows at closing time. This had the dual effect of removing all the of the usual pub stale tobacco smells and, due to our Thameside situation, also froze out our 'living-dead' until their next daily visit. However, on this particular night I was too heavy-handed in my enthusiasm to clear out my 'friends'. I preceded to push the entire plate glass window out of its frame, sending it crashing down onto the terrace over the

water. The entire clientele woke from their stupors, frightened by the crashing sound and blasts of cold air. The disadvantage was my early night turned into a late one as I had to wait for the boarding-up boys to arrive. The intelligentsia were afforded more wonderful talking points for many following months. Needless to say that I could not stand that environment for too long and I put in for a transfer to a different branch of the organisation.

The Gazette, Thursday April 8 2004 OUR COMMUNITY

30 years as a chef on many starry nights

CHEF to the stars Ralph Kley has seen a lot of funny things at celebrity dos during his many years in the trade.

These have included talk-show queen Vanessa Feltz's casino-style bash, Arsenal's Dennis Bergkamp dropping in to a Hadley Wood party, and even an orgy at a St John's Wood penthouse.

Now his Bounds Green catering company, Entrees On Trays, is celebrating 30 years of dishing up to famous faces.

Ralph, of The Bourne, Southgate, runs the kitchen space from Thornhill Road, having started the business in Windmill Hill.

He said: "I remember Lorraine Chase; she was a lovely, smashing person.

"And the Arsenal players often pop up. Maureen Lipman used to be at a lot of them too."

Ralph first set up the business in 1974, after a stint running a restaurant in Chelsea's King's Road during the 1960s.

He said: "At that time it was the hub of where everything was happening.

"And the restaurant, Kenco, was one of the places to be seen. That's the dawn of where it all happened. And a lot of people knew I did parties, so we started doing it for the swinging set."

Since then he and his team have been hired for soo many posh parties and glam dos to mention, and the work is still rolling in.

He said: "We've done lots of different things over the years because of the sort of people who hire us.

"Recently we were catering for a film which was being filmed in a south London cemetery.

"We'd set up the marquee and everything, when some locals walked by and said 'When I die I'm going to be buried here. Look how well they treat their guests'."

But sometimes you really could not make it up.

"We were doing a party in St John's Wood. The staff kept coming back into the kitchen and saying it was getting a bit hot in there," he said.

"Then they came in and said everyone had stripped down. We just got the money and rushed out."

Flambé great: Chef to celebrities Ralph Kley is still hard at work